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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of single-parent families on adolescent females and their aspirations for the future. The study, taking data from the national longitudinal High School and Beyond (HSB) study, uses a stratified weighted national sample of 4,573 black and white high school senior females in the class of 1980. The sample includes girls who were living with their mothers or other female guardians at the time they participated in the HSB study. Analysis using multiple regression reveals that, when other variables such as race, family income, mother's education, mother's employment status, and mother's occupation are controlled, girls living with their mothers are more likely to plan for higher education and delay or forgo marriage than are girls who lived with both a mother and a father-figure. The study also indicates that when other factors are controlled, black females plan to marry at later ages than do white females. Also, those from high income families and those with more educated mothers plan to marry at later ages than do other girls. The possible reasons for these patterns may be freedom from traditional gender roles or a high value on self-reliance. This research indicates that successful prediction of females' plans for education and marriage are not consistent with a "culture of poverty" thesis. Statistical data are presented in two tables. A list of 21 references is appended. (JB)

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GROWING UP IN A SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY: SOME NOT-SO-NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON ADOLESCENT FEMALES' PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

In the public's perception, much of adolescents' trouble today can be traced to deterioration in the quality of family life and, in particular, to the increasing number of children growing up in single-parent families. In contrast to some previous research, this research suggests that living in a single-parent family may not have universally negative effects on high school females' plans for the future. This research used a stratified, weighted, national sample of 4,573 black and white high school senior females in the class of 1980 (High School & Beyond). Analysis using multiple regression revealed that, when other variables (Race, Family Income, Mother's Education, Mother's Employment Status, and Mother's Occupation) are controlled, girls living with their mothers are (1) more likely to plan higher education and (2) more likely to plan to delay or forgo marriage than girls who lived with both a mother and a father-figure. This research indicates that successful prediction of females' plans for education and marriage are not consistent with a "culture of poverty" thesis.

Introduction: Late Adolescence, Female Gender Roles, and Adult-Role Plans

The last year of high school represents both the culmination of that most intense period of socialization, childhood and adolescence, and the point at which the plans of youth have the highest probable correspondence to actual adult achievement. Late adolescence, and particularly the senior year in high school, are therefore a critical juncture for the study of gender.

Several studies, albeit primarily focused on the impact of early marriage and early parenting (e.g., McLaughlin & Micklin, 1985; Elder, 1985; Marini, 1978; 1984), have documented how off-timing in transitional events during adolescence can have persistent effects on educational and occupational goal attainment, economic achievement, marital stability, and subsequent childbearing. Stated another way, the girl who delays childbearing and attends college is more likely to be the woman who retains or attains middle class status than the girl who does not pursue higher education. To a considerable extent then, the later quality of women's lives is related to their plans during late adolescence and to the immediately corresponding behaviors regarding, for example, education and marriage.

Completion of education and marriage (with labor-force entry and parenthood) constitute critical social transitions for passage into adulthood (Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, 1974). However, much of the research on transition to adulthood has examined male unemployment (e.g., Stephenson, 1979). The greatest amount of research on female gender roles has been focused on white, middle-class, adult women (Karraker, 1989). Research which has examined female, especially black female, transition to adulthood has most often concentrated on teenage pregnancy (Chilman, 1980; Smith, 1982).

The management of non-family roles and the management of the balance between family and non-family roles are among the most critical issues of life management today, especially for females. Adolescents', and particularly adolescent females', adult-role plans are of central importance in the study of gender roles.

Methodology

This study used data collected as part of High School & Beyond (HS&B), a national, longitudinal study in which self-administered questionnaires were distributed to a sample from the 1980 cohort of sophomores and seniors. HS&B employed a two-stage design in which schools and students were sampled using a stratified probability strategy (National Opinion Research Center, 1986). Researchers then drew a subsample of 11,500 seniors, which was weighted to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection and retention. The research reported in this paper uses 4,573 black and white females from that weighted sample who were living with their mother or another female guardian at the time they participated in the HS&B study.

This research measured six independent variables (Race [treated as a dummy variable], Family Income, Mother's Education Status, MOTHER'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS, and Mother's Family Status) and two dependent variables (Education Plan and Marriage Plan).

Mother's Family Status was drawn from the question, "Which of the following people live in the same household with you?" "Father?" "Other male?" (asked as separate items) and was coded "mother only," "mother living with girl's father." Although Mother's Family Status is a trichotomous nominal variable, order is implied with the highest value indicating highest conformity to traditional family structure, the lowest value indicating lowest conformity to that structure, and the middle value indicating a level between the highest and lowest.

Education Plan was measured by the question: "As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?" Nine response categories ranged from "less than high

school" to "doctoral degree." Marriage Plan was measured by the question: "At what age do you expect to get married?" This variable was coded continuously, but with a lowest value for this variable being "19 or less."

To analyze the causal effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables, education plan and marriage plan were each regressed separately on each of five independent variables plus four additional interaction variables (Race x Family Income, Race x Mother's Education Status, Race x Mother's Employment Status, and Race x Mother's Family Status). Each model was examined on the basis of (1) the variables included in the model and (2) the direction and size of coefficients (betas). (The fit of these data to the assumptions of multiple regression was discussed in Karraker [1989].)

Findings

This paper was stimulated by a serendipitous finding discovered during the course of a larger research project aimed at answering the question: What contributions do race, family income, and characteristics of the mother make to the adult-role plans of adolescent females? (See Karraker, 1989; 1991a, 1991b) However, the results pertaining to the effect of Mother's Family Status on Education Plans and Marriage Plans are the primary focus in this paper.

As summarized in Table I, four independent variables account for 16% of the variance in Education Plan. (Mother's Employment Status and all of the interaction variables fail to meet the minimum criteria for entry into the equation.) When other factors are controlled, black females have plans for higher levels of education than white females. Also, females from high income families and those with higher educated mothers have plans for higher levels of education than other females. However, the finding of most interest here is that, although the size of the beta is relatively small (-.07), females who live in a household with both mother and father are less likely to plan higher education than other females.

As summarized in Table II, six independent variables account for 4% of the variance

in Marriage Plan. (Three of the interaction variables [Race X Family Income, Mother's Employment Status, and Mother's Family Status] fail to meet the minimum criteria for entry into the equation.) When other factors are controlled, black females plans to marry at later ages than do white females. Also, those from high income families and those with higher educated mothers plan to marry at later ages than other girls. Of course, the absence of drop-outs, some of whose dropping-out coincided with marriage, suggests that the average ages at which girls plan to marry are somewhat higher than average ages would have been if drop-outs had been included. This would be particularly true among black girls and those from lower socioeconomic status, who Peng (1983) found in a study of HS&B participation drop-out rates, are more likely than other girls to leave high school prior to graduation.

The finding of most interest here is that, although the size of the beta is relatively small (-.06), females who live in a household with both mother and father are less likely to plan to postpone or forego marriage than other females.

Discussion

In sum, although the relationships are relatively weak, a female is more likely to plan to pursue higher education and later marriage if she is not living with her father. Perhaps father-absence frees females from the inhibitions of traditional gender role stereotypes observed in two-parent families, thus releasing them for higher aspirations regarding instrumental roles. Perhaps females growing up in father-absent families are simply more likely than other females to perceive an advantage in or a necessity for self-reliance which they determine could be enhanced by greater education attainment. Another explanation may lie in the possibility that Mother's Family Status as operationalized in this research does not affect females' Education Plan in a linear way. Future research should evaluate the effect of Mother's Family Status further.

Perhaps females who live in mother-only families distrust marriage as a stable lifestyle

more than those from two-parent families. If so, females from mother-only families would be less likely to plan to enter marriage at younger ages. As in the case of Education Plan, perhaps girls growing up in father-absent families are simply more likely than other girls to perceive an advantage in or a necessity for self-reliance which they determine could be enhanced by deferring marriage in favor of other instrumental plans.

In confirming findings reported in earlier research (Bush, Simmons, Hutchinson, & Blyth, 1977-1978; Tittle, 1981), this research indicates that the "culture of poverty" thesis (promoted by Moynihan [1968], Lewis [1978], Murray [1984] and others) fails to provide a valid picture of black and white females' adult-role plans. That thesis argues that growing up in a single-parent family depresses adolescent females' adult-role plans. Although mother's family status was a statistically significant predictor of education and marriage plans, the direction of the relationships were not in the expected direction and the size of the coefficients was very small. When other factors are controlled, females growing up in a mother-only family plan higher (not lower) levels of education and plan to marry later (not earlier) than those growing up in a two-parent family.

Implications

Additional research is needed to determine the extent to which results reported in this research reflect non-linear effects of mother's family status on female's plans and the extent to which mother's family status may interact with other variables such as family income, mother's education, and mother's employment status. Although other research (e.g., Agnew & Jones, 1988) has focused on the meaning of "plans" to adolescents, the data used in this study do not measure several aspects of this complex concept. At another level, to what extent are these females - most of whom plan occupations requiring at least a college degree (Karraker, 1989) - making plans which are mutually compatible with their education agenda? What happens to those females whose education plan is not in sync with their marriage plan?

The research and social policy traditions in ambitions, aspirations, and plans have too often begun from the perspective that lower social status (as indicated by the very real economic consequences of growing up in a female-headed household) fosters cultural patterns which in turn inhibit achievement motivation (i.e., the "culture of poverty"). Confounding that tradition are critiques (e.g., Ellwood, 1988) and studies (e.g., Winkler, 1990) which find that even the poorest populations possess cultural vitality and functional behavioral norms.

The research reported in this paper has confounded the stereotype that - more than white females' - black females' aspirations lie more in the area of childbearing than education. The re-popularized "culture of poverty" thesis (that poorer adolescents-and particularly adolescents of color-lack achievement motivation) remains a persistent theme in American culture and social policy. To the contrary of those beliefs, the research reported in this paper found that female adolescents (at least those who remained in high school through the senior year) living with a mother-only actually had plans for more education and later marriage than their two-parent peers. As a foundation for developing opportunities for all adolescents, empirical research must continue to play an important role in social policy formation.

Table I
Statistics for Multiple Regression Statistics of Education Plan (valid weighted N=3542).

Adjusted R Square .16
(s.e.=2.07, F=165.9, p<.0001)

Variables in the Equation
(highest value)

Education Plan
(Doctoral Degree)

Independent Variables	BETA	(p)
Mother's Education Status (Doctoral degree)	.30	(<.0001)
Family Income ($38,000 or more)	.19	(<.0001)
Race (black)	.10	(<.0001)
Mother's Family Status (living with girl's father)	-.07	(<.0001)

Table II
Statistics for Multiple Regression Statistics of Marriage Plan (valid weighted N=3541).

Adjusted R Square .04
(s.e.=2.95, F=28.28, p=0)

Variables in the Equation
(highest value)

Marriage Plan
(don't plan to marry)

Independent Variables	BETA	(p)
Race (black)	.21	(<.0001)
Mother's Education Status (Doctoral degree)	.12	(<.0001)
Family Income ($38,000 or more)	.09	(<.0001)
Mother's Family Status (living with girl's father)	-.06	(.0004)
Race X Mother's Education Status	-.08	(.0033)
Mother's Employment Status (employed full-time)	-.03	(.0387)

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